Bullying Prevention in Schools Starts with Social-Emotional Learning

Bullying has been acknowledged as a problem in schools for several decades. Recent media attention to the issue has thrust bullying into the forefront of many legislators', educators', and parents' minds. In response to media attention and heightened concern on the part of lawmakers, educators, and families, research in this field has been burgeoning as well. Results from studies have taught us not only about the rates of bullying, but a great deal about the characteristics of both children who bully and those who are targeted.

Although many approaches have been developed to curb bullying, only a few programs have been shown to be effective in rigorous evaluations. Faced with increasing pressure from parents, community members, and district and state mandates, schools are struggling to figure out how best to address the issue of bullying and provide safe and respectful learning environments for all students.

Effective bullying prevention requires a multi-pronged effort. School staff need to have appropriate policies and procedures in place and need to know the right way to work with students involved in bullying. But another critically important part of tackling the problem is focusing on developing the social-emotional skills of children. These skills enable children to be socially competent citizens within the school environment and help build an overall positive climate within the school. Attention to these skills will support the development of healthier, happier children who are ready to learn and contribute to a safer environment.

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Serious Problem with Serious Consequences

Bullying is intentional negative behavior that is repeated and involves an imbalance of social or physical power.1 Because bullying inherently involves social relationships it affects all participants involved: the child being bullied, the child doing the bullying, and the bystanders. No one would question that bullying is harmful to those that are victimized. Recent reports estimate that about 20% of children are victims of bullying at school.[2] Paying attention to victims of bullying is important, because students who are bullied report having more physical health complaints and engage in higher levels of problem behavior, such as smoking and drinking.[3] In addition, students who are bullied can suffer negative effects that last into adulthood, including depression, anxiety, sadness, and loneliness.[3]

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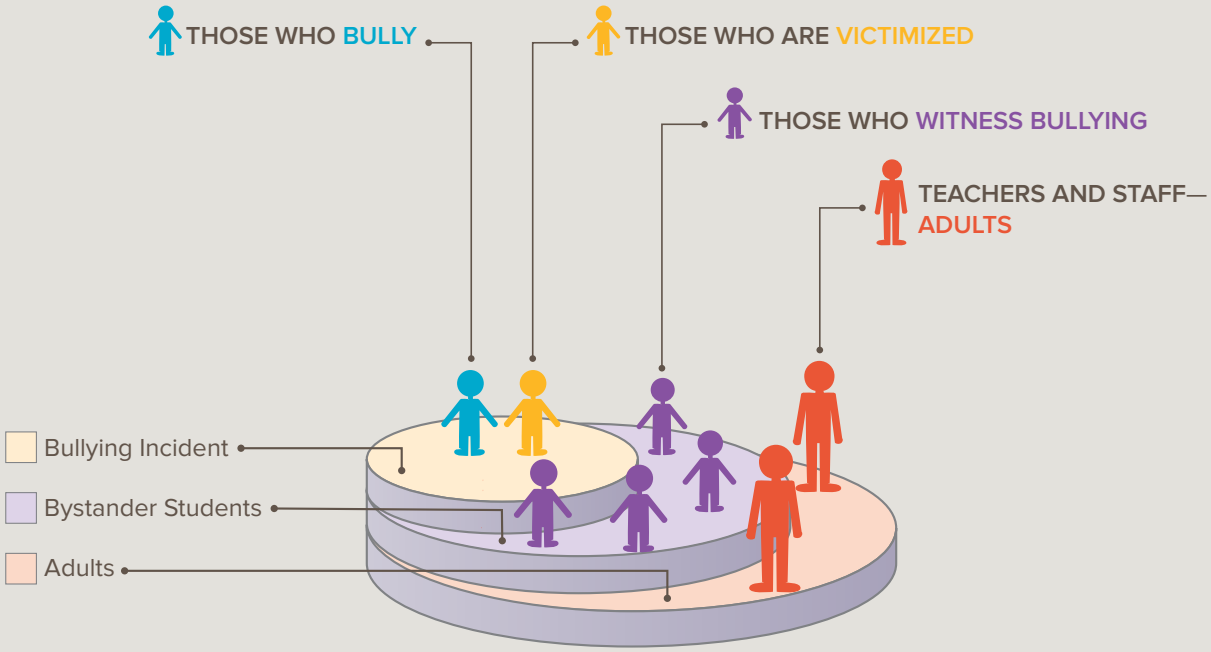
What may be more surprising is that those who are doing the bullying also suffer. Students who bully others are at higher risk for a wide range of problems including abusing alcohol and other drugs, getting into fights, and doing poorly academically.[3] And like victims of bullying, children who bully are at higher risk of having problems into adulthood, such as criminal convictions and substance use.[4] These are disturbing consequences, given that recent reports estimate that about 13% of children in schools are directly engaging in bullying.[2]

Another group of students affected by bullying is bystanders (students who witness bullying). Bullying rarely happens in isolated corners of the school where no one is watching. It often happens in very open places in front of other students. And with greater use of technology, bullying can happen in very public forums. In fact, bystanders make up the largest group of students affected by bullying in school, with 71% of students saying they have witnessed bullying within the last month.[5] A recent report by the National Crime Prevention Council estimates that 6 out of 10 children witness at least one bullying incident in school a day. The high number of children who witness bullying is disturbing, given that bystanders are also found to exhibit negative consequences. Research shows that students who witness bullying as bystanders also suffer increased use of tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs, have increased mental health problems, and are more likely to miss or skip school.[6]

Why Do Schools Need to Act?

Although bullying can occur anywhere, most reported bullying happens in school. Bullying can greatly affect the school environment and hinder students' academic success. Bullying can lower academic achievement, influence school attendance, and even contribute to higher dropout rates.[2] And remember, academic achievement is lower for all students involved in bullying: those who are victimized, those who bully, and those who witness bullying.

Everyone Involved Must Contribute to an Improved School Climate



Many schools recognize the need to address bullying. They have developed and put into place policies and procedures that outline actions to take against it and have trained their staff in how to respond effectively to reports of bullying. These efforts at the adult level are important and necessary in setting the groundwork for promoting a safe and positive climate for students. However, more needs to be done to effect change in students' behaviors. Focusing on student behavior not only affects healthy development of the individual, it will also contribute to an overall positive school environment.

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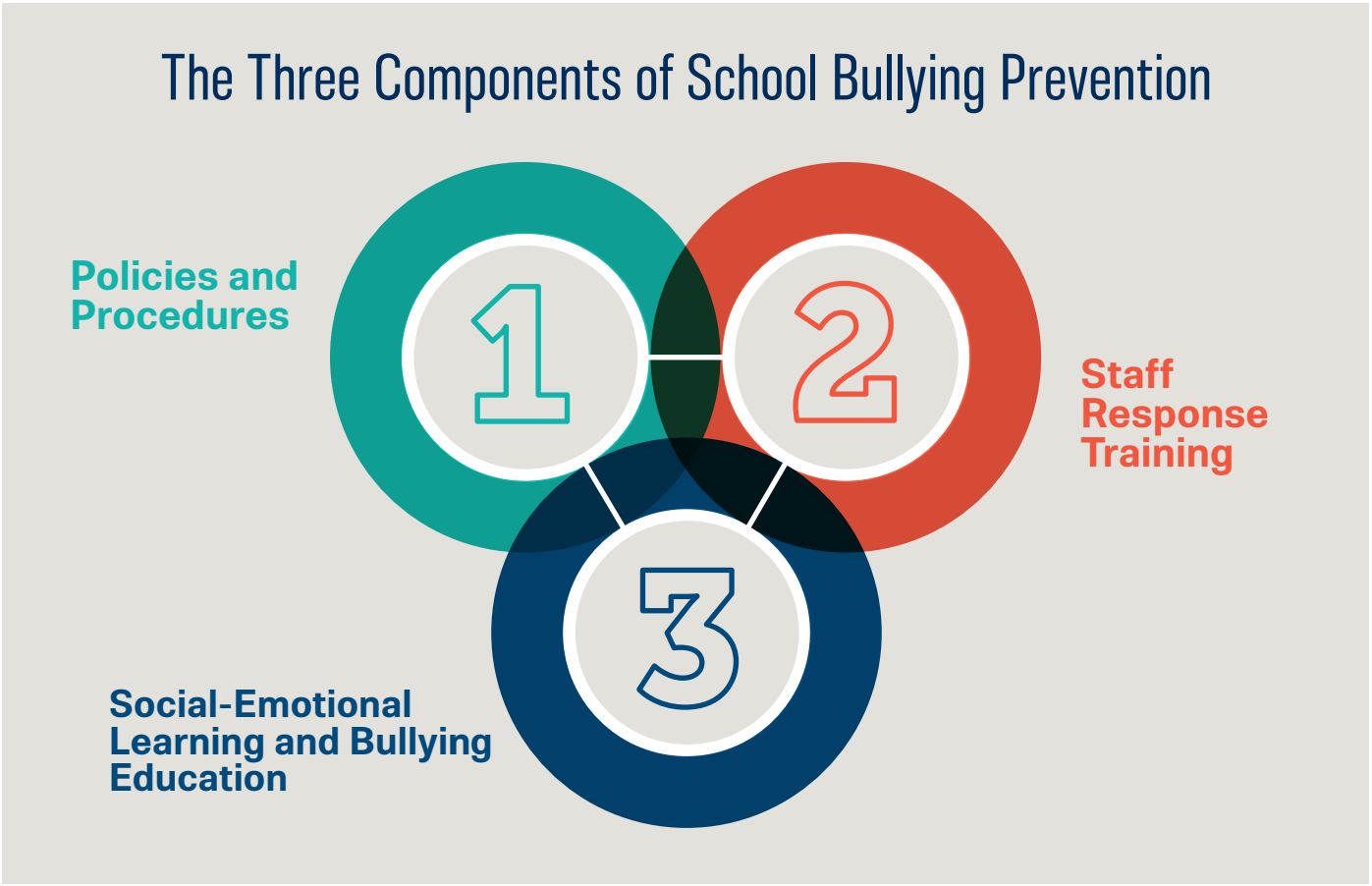
What Can Schools Do?

Several bullying prevention programs exist. However, schools need to be careful about which program they adopt. Some programs are not supported by research evidence that they are effective in dealing with bullying. Research is clear that the best approach to bullying prevention is a comprehensive effort that addresses factors at the school, staff, and child level.

We know a lot about how student social dynamics and social-emotional skills predict behavior of those who bully and their targets. We understand that bullying is typically a group phenomenon that involves multiple aspects of social relationships.[7] Many students bully for social reasons and use bullying effectively to gain status. Victims of bullying tend to be socially withdrawn and lack positive self-concepts.[8] Bystanders often report feeling guilt and



helplessness for not standing up for a peer who is being bullied and often do not intervene for fear of retaliation. Given the social nature of bullying, a key component in combating this behavior is to focus on changing bullying norms and increasing the social-emotional competence of students.[9–12]

Therefore schools should focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) skills as part of their efforts to deal with bullying issues. SEL involves "the systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children more effectively handle life challenges and thrive in both their learning and their social environments."[13] Research-based curricula that teach social-emotional competence help create physically and emotionally safe school environments[13] and even increase students' scores on standardized achievement tests.[14]

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How Does SEL Help Prevent Bullying?

One of the most widely used SEL programs is the Second Step program from Committee for Children. It is used in roughly 40% of the K–8 schools in the US. It includes easy-to-teach classroom lessons for PreK through Grade 8 that enhance students' social-emotional competence through a focus on building SEL skills. Second Step SEL focuses on core social-emotional skills that are particularly

important for bullying prevention, including empathy, emotion management, and social problem solving. In addition, embedded within these lessons are topics such as friendship building and how to be assertive, which are also key skills in bullying prevention.

Empathy

One component of being empathic is feeling or understanding what someone else is feeling. This skill has been found to help prevent bullying. Compared to both children who bully and those who are bullied, prosocial children have been found to show greater empathetic awareness.[15] Greater awareness of others' feelings not only allows students to treat each other with respect and kindness, it may cause them to intervene in bullying situations as well. Empathic concern toward peers makes bystanders more likely to intervene to stop bullying.[16,17]

Second Step SEL has a group of lessons specifically focused on empathy. In particular, students are taught to identify feelings, understand the feelings of others, and show care and compassion to others. Another key component of the empathy lessons is teaching perspective-taking, that is, understanding what others are thinking or feeling. Studies have found that students with good perspective-taking skills are less likely to be physically, verbally, and indirectly aggressive to peers.[18] Thus it is important to teach perspective-taking to help prevent bullying. Perspective-taking skills also make students more likely to offer emotional support to others,[19] making these skills crucial in helping bystanders take a stand against bullying.

Emotion Regulation

Emotion management is the ability to monitor and regulate strong emotions and calm down when upset. It is a particularly important skill to possess in order to build positive relationships. Lack of emotion management may make a student more prone to being bullied. In fact, research finds that students tend to be more victimized by their peers if they are hyperactive, exhibit emotional outbursts, or are emotionally unstable.[20]

Exacerbating the problem is that nearly half of children who are bullied tend to escalate and intensify the bullying by responding with highly emotional reactions, such as yelling, screaming, or crying.[21] Good emotion management not only prevents children from becoming victims of bullying, it also helps them respond to it more effectively. In addition, research has shown that students are more likely to bully others if they lack emotion-management skills.[8,22] Teaching emotion-management skills, then, helps not only students who are bullied, but those who bully as well.

Second Step SEL emotion-management lessons help children develop skills to manage their feelings. Children are taught to identify their feelings (particularly strong ones) and situations that may bring on these emotions. Techniques such as belly breathing and self-talk to manage strong feelings like anger or worry are a key component of this unit. Learning to manage strong emotions may help both children who bully and those who are bullied get along with peers and make good choices. In fact, research has found that students being bullied can learn to use self-talk and other calming strategies to avoid crying, retaliating, or responding in other ways likely to mark them as easy targets for continued victimization.[23,24]

Social Problem Solving

Social problem solving is the ability to successfully navigate through social problems and challenges. Children who are good social problem solvers can recognize a problem, reflect on possible solutions, and understand consequences to a particular action. It's no surprise that this skill is important in managing peer challenges and responding in thoughtful ways.

It has been found that both children who bully and those who are bullied lack social problem-solving skills.[8] Those who bully, for instance, often misread social cues and situations.[25] This lack of social awareness can lead children to act more hostile and aggressively in social situations, including bullying other students. They also have more aggressive ideas about how to handle conflicts.[1] Students who are bullied also lack effective social problem-solving skills.[8] They may behave passively in social situations, which can set them up for being bullied.[26] Effectively managing social situations is also an important skill for those students who are bystanders. By properly assessing a social situation and coming to the appropriate decision to intervene, bystanders can help stop bullying.

Social-Emotional Skills + Benefits by Bullying Roles

SEL Skill	Victim	Child Who Bullies	Bystander
	Less likely to be bullied and less harmed by bullying	Less likely to bully	More likely to respond appropriately
Empathy		✓	✓
Emotion Regulation	✓	✓	
Social Problem Solving	✓	✓	✓
Friendship Building	✓	✓	✓
Assertiveness	✓		✓

Second Step SEL highlights the importance of teaching social problem-solving skills and has an entire unit dedicated to problem solving. In particular, these lessons teach children to recognize a social problem, generate multiple solutions to the problem, predict consequences, and ultimately select a reasonable solution to the problem that is safe and respectful. These problem-solving strategies can help children who are bullied de-escalate the conflict.[27] Lastly, teaching these problem-solving lessons can help prevent bullying by making children who may bully aware of how to deal with a social situation effectively in a nonaggressive way.

Friendship Building and Assertiveness Training

Social status and relationships are an important element of bullying. Lower social status is related to being bullied.[8,11,26] Bullied children tend to have fewer friends, and those they do have are often bullied as well.[20] Children who bully also often lack adequate social skills.[8] However, many of those who bully have high social status and use this status to impose their power on their victims. Bystanders often report fear of losing social status as one reason they do not intervene on behalf of bullied classmates.[6] Thus, improving social relationships and softening social hierarchies can aid in preventing bullying.

One of the overarching goals of Second Step SEL is to help students gain friends and get along better with peers by increasing friendship skills. Students are taught to play fairly (for example, sharing, taking turns, and following rules), eliminate peer exclusion, and treat peers respectfully. The ability to make and keep friends successfully is an important protective factor against being bullied. Students who have at least one friend are less likely to be bullied by peers, and bullied students with a good friend experience less subsequent bullying and fewer emotional and behavioral problems.[21,28]

Another component of building positive relationships is understanding how and when to be assertive. Second Step lessons teach children how to differentiate between aggressive, passive, and assertive responses. Learning to be assertive is particularly important for children who may be bullied, so they are not targeted more often.[24] In addition, learning assertiveness can help bystanders use specific strategies to stop the bullying or ask adults for help.[29,30]

The Key to Prevention: Teach SEL

Bullying is a pervasive problem in our nation's schools. It has significant consequences for all involved: children who are bullied, children who bully, and children who witness bullying. Even though many bullying prevention programs exist, not all of them have been found to be effective. Teaching social-emotional competence has been found to be an important ingredient in effective bullying prevention that also supports children's healthy development. Social-emotional skills are key components in tackling the bullying problem. Social-emotional skills help all those involved in bullying and can be easily adopted into school curricula. Teaching these skills not only promotes a safe and positive climate within schools, it creates healthy children who are ready to learn.

Contact

Research-based Second Step SEL is a universal, classroom-based curriculum for Preschool through Grade 8 that teaches students the skills they need to be safe, succeed in school, and get along well with others.

Learn about more educators' experiences with Second Step SEL at SecondStep.org/success or call Committee for Children at 800-634-4449, ext. 1.

Who We Are

Though we're best known for our innovative SEL-centric programs for schools, Committee for Children is involved in all kinds of initiatives to improve the lives of children. Founded as a nonprofit in 1979 to help victims of child sexual abuse, we continue to advocate for policies and legislation to protect kids and provide equal opportunities for all. From our headquarters in Seattle, Washington, we partner with researchers, publishers, and nonprofits around the world. Our programs reach students in over 70 countries, and we work to make sure all children have a chance to thrive.

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